



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

Artists, U.S.

Contributors: **Author:**Genny Beemyn

Edited by: Abbie E. Goldberg & Genny Beemyn

Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

Chapter Title: "Artists, U.S."

Pub. Date: 2021

Access Date: April 13, 2021

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781544393810

Online ISBN: 9781544393858

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781544393858.n15>

Print pages: 47-50

© 2021 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

Growing up in a cisnormative society characterized by an entrenched gender binary, trans people have had to invent and create a space for themselves. It is thus not surprising that many trans people have been artists and have developed groundbreaking work in various media. Through their artistic contributions, they have helped establish an identity and a discursive place for themselves and the larger trans community. Moreover, given that trans artists challenge societal assumptions about gender, it is likewise not surprising that many also do not conform to the expectation that they limit themselves to one artistic genre; instead, they tend to produce work in a variety of disciplines and/or mix different media. This entry discusses six contemporary U.S. artists who have received widespread critical acclaim: micha cárdenas, Zackary Drucker, Juliana Huxtable, Amos Mac, Wu Tsang, and Alok Vaid-Menon. These artists express themselves through numerous creative forms, including performance, film, digital media, photography, self-portraiture, fashion design, poetry, and prose.

micha cárdenas

A first-generation Colombian American, micha cárdenas is a trans female educator, writer, digital media artist, and clothing designer. She is an assistant professor of Art and Design: Games + Playable Media at the University of California–Santa Cruz, and coauthor of the books *The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities* (2012) and *Trans Desire/Affective Cyborgs* (2010).

Her artistic work supports the health and welfare of people, especially trans women of color, and the planet using interactive media design, virtual reality, science fiction, and performance. In 2015, cárdenas created the online, interactive game *Redshift and Portalmetal*, which focuses on a trans woman of color who must travel to other worlds because her planet's environment is becoming unlivable. In describing the work on her website, cárdenas states that the game poses the question, "As climate change forces us to travel to the stars and build new homes and families, how do we build on this land, where we are settlers, while working to undo colonization?"

In 2020, cárdenas created *Sin Sol (No Sun)*, an augmented reality game that tells the story of climate-induced wildfires through the eyes of a trans Latinx artificial intelligence hologram. Set 50 years in the future, the game depicts the environmental collapse occurring now using three-dimensional scans of forests from the Pacific Northwest. Like *Redshift and Portalmetal*, *Sin Sol* considers how climate change intersects with race, gender, and immigration, as well as the interplay between personal trauma and environmental trauma.

cárdenas's projects are not limited to virtual reality and future worlds; through her art, she also seeks to have a direct impact on the lives of marginalized peoples today. For example, she has collaborated on *UNSTOPPABLE*, an effort to design and disseminate information about how Black communities can produce DIY bulletproof clothing to address the horrific rate of murders of Black people, particularly Black trans women. She also initiated the development of *Local Autonomy Networks (Autonets)*, online and offline community networks that exist outside of corporate-owned infrastructures, including a line of mesh-networked electronic clothing that can alert other nearby Autonet garment wearers that someone needs help and their location. The project aims to increase community autonomy and reduce violence against people because of their race, gender, and sexuality.

Zackary Drucker

Zackary Drucker is a white trans female photographer, actor, and film and television producer whose work documents her own and other trans people's experiences. For example, she had a 6-year relationship with trans male film producer and director Rhys Ernst, which they recounted through photographs that they exhibited as "Relationship" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2014. The photos chronicle the development of their relationship and their different gender transitions and capture everyday moments in their lives, like trips together and relaxing at home, which serve to humanize and valorize the relationships of trans people. "Relationship" was released as a book in 2016.

Drucker and Ernst have also collaborated on other projects. They created the short film *She Gone Rogue*

(2012), in which Drucker plays a fictional character who has dreamlike encounters with the groundbreaking trans women performers Flawless Sabrina, Vaginal Davis, and Holly Woodlawn. The film is both an homage to the artists, who were role models for Drucker, and a representation of Drucker's need to "go rogue" and forge her own gender path. Drucker and Ernst also worked together from 2014 to 2017 as consultants and producers on the Amazon series *Transparent*, where they sought to ensure that trans people were portrayed accurately, and on *This Is Me* (2015), a series of 5- to 6-minute documentaries about issues faced by trans people today based on topics raised in *Transparent*. Drucker is featured in an episode on trans women sisterhood.

A central theme of Drucker's artistic work is the need for trans people to take control of how they are represented. This concern is also evident in her support of other trans artists. In 2017, she edited a special issue of *Aperture* magazine on "Future Gender," which focused on how trans people from different countries have used photography to illustrate their own lives, communities, and histories.

Juliana Huxtable

A Black trans female visual artist, writer, performer, model, and DJ, Juliana Huxtable explores the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in her art using a variety of media, including self-portraiture, text-based prints, writing, and music. Among her best-known works are photographic images in which she places herself within historical and Afrofuturistic settings, signaling that Black trans people have and will continue to exist. For example, in *History (Period Piece)* (2013), Huxtable superimposed an image of herself with U.S. and British flags in her hair against a tapestry depicting merchant ships from the era of colonization and the slave trade. The piece simultaneously addresses how this history informs conceptions of Blackness, transness, and queerness today and how Huxtable herself must contend with this past.

Two of her other visual works, *Nuwaubian Princess* (2013) and *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm; 2015)*, are nude self-portraits that have an ethereal quality, as if to suggest a vision of a world in which the bodies of Black trans women can be centered and respected. In *Untitled in the Rage*, Huxtable, whose skin is painted turquoise green and her long braids highlighted in neon yellow, is sitting on her heels and positioned in profile, so that her body draws in the viewer. But while the image invites one's gaze, its representation of a trans woman of color challenges stereotypical ideas and ideals of race, gender, and sexuality. At the same time, the supernatural and fantastical elements of the piece, along with the reference to the Nibiru Cataclysm (a supposed impending disastrous encounter between the Earth and another planetary object), point to the existence of different realities and the fluidity of identities.

Huxtable has also created works that address her experiences growing up, her interest in science fiction and online spaces, and how race, gender, and sexuality are conceptualized in the digital age. In the series *Seven Archetypes* (2012–2013), she contextualized her gender transition alongside dominant constructions of gender and sexuality. In *Untitled (For Stewart; 2012)*, Huxtable created a color inkjet print of one of her all-caps, stream-of-consciousness poems that describes the misogyny of video games, the blurred lines between video games and pornography, her alienation from boys, and her vision of herself as female. This poem was featured in her poetry book, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland* (2017). She also cowrote, with artist Hannah Black, the science fiction novella *Life*; it is a narrative about two risk analysts taking on the ultimate catastrophic assessment: an impending apocalypse.

Amos Mac

A white trans male photographer, editor, and writer, Amos Mac has greatly increased the visibility of trans people through a variety of media. In 2009 he cofounded, with Rocco Kayiatos, *Original Plumbing*, the first U.S. print magazine focused on trans male culture, and served as its editor for the 20 issues that were published over the next decade. The magazine's photographs (many taken by Mac) and stories helped many trans men to see images of people like themselves, and its coverage of topics like developing careers and becoming fathers addressed issues that were not being discussed anywhere else at the time. Highlights of the magazine were reprinted in a book, *Original Plumbing: The Best of Ten Years of Trans Male Culture*, in 2019.

In addition to his photography for *Original Plumbing*, Mac's pictures have been featured in dozens of publications, including the *New York Times*, *Interview*, and *Out*. In 2011, he published his photographs of Zackary Drucker in *Translady Fanzine* and the exhibition "Distance Is Where the Heart Is, Home Is Where You Hang Your Heart." Mac also contributed to Drucker's "Future Gender" issue of *Aperture* magazine with photographs of Juliana Huxtable. In 2015, he broke new ground by photographing that fall's collection of the H&M fashion brand "& Other Stories," which was the first such photo shoot to use all trans models and crew members.

In recent years, Mac has written for television and film. He was the associate producer for the documentary series *Gaycation* (2016–2017), which explored LGBTQ cultures around the world, and is currently a story editor for the relaunch of the teen drama series *Gossip Girl* (2021). With film director Aisling Chin-Yee, Mac cowrote *No Ordinary Man* (2020), a documentary feature about trans male jazz musician Billy Tipton.

Wu Tsang

Born to a Chinese father and a Swedish American mother and identifying as gender fluid, filmmaker, visual artist, and performer Wu Tsang has described herself as being in a place of "in-betweenness." This sense of existing outside of traditional categories is similarly reflected in her work, which often dismantles the boundaries between fiction and documentary, performance and realism, and public and private spaces. A case in point is Tsang's first feature film, *Wildness* (2012), which centers on the Silver Platter, a Los Angeles bar that catered to LGBTQ Latinx immigrants.

Wildness, which premiered at the Museum of Modern Art, developed out of a weekly performance art party of the same name that Tsang co-organized at the Silver Platter from 2008 until the bar closed in 2010. The film depicts how the parties led to the mixing of the bar's long-time patrons with young artists and performers and how the two groups at times had to address differences in race, gender, class, and culture. A central question of *Wildness* involves the development of safe spaces: What does it mean to different communities, and when two communities are marginalized, whose safety takes precedence? While the film takes a narrative approach, it also has elements of magical realism, with the bar itself serving as one of these narrators. Through this technique, Tsang shows that environments are multifaceted and dynamic—as much actor as acted upon.

Another of Tsang's films, *Duilian* (2016), likewise blurs the line between imagination and reality. It envisions the intimate relationship thought to have existed between Qui Jin, a turn-of-the-20th-century Chinese poet and revolutionary, and Wu Zhiying, a calligrapher with whom Jin frequently collaborated. In the film, Tsang plays Zhiying, and boychild, a gender-nonconforming performance artist with whom Tsang has often collaborated, plays Jin. Scenes of the two of them conversing in Jin's poems are interspersed with sequences of wushu martial arts and documentary-style footage of boychild in 19th-century clothing walking through the streets of contemporary Hong Kong. Although fictive, *Duilian* serves to write the couple into history, which is especially important given the erasure of their relationship then and often still today.

Alok Vaid-Menon

Alok, as they are known professionally, is a nonbinary trans femme Indian American performance artist, writer, and fashion designer. They first gained critical acclaim as part of the spoken word duo *DarkMatter* with Janani Balasubramanian from 2013 to 2017. The group's name and poetry called attention to the invisibility of queer and trans people of color, and their performances highlighted how predominantly white queer and trans communities, like the larger white society, often marginalize people of color and fail to examine their racial privilege.

Alok's physical appearance (which often mixes traditionally male and female gender expressions) and artistic work challenge the gender binary and what constitutes "female" and "male" aspects of presentation. They are the author of *Femme in Public* (2017) and *Beyond the Gender Binary* (2020); the latter is a book aimed at teens and young adults in which Alok uses some of their experiences as a gender-nonconforming individual to point out how society tries to limit gender expression when the only actual boundaries are people's

imaginations.

Alok's fashions are also designed to confront gender binaries, as well as transmisogyny, femmephobia, and racism. In 2019, they released *Natural Bodies*, their third fashion collection, which took pieces and elements of clothing that are stereotyped as for women and "feminine" (e.g., skirts, gowns, frills, bright colors) and questioned why these aspects of dress are gendered and not readily available to people of all genders. At the same time, Alok linked the dismissal of femme fashion as superficial and inauthentic to the denial that trans women are "really" women by naming each design after a word that is used to reject the authenticity of trans identities, such as "biological" and "innate." Alok's collection speaks to the genuineness of the lives of femmes, particularly trans femmes of color, and forces the viewer to recognize how cisness, masculinity, and whiteness are commonly treated as "natural."

Genny Beemyn

See also [Artists, Canadian](#); [Film](#); [Geek Culture](#); [Musicians](#); [Tipton, Billy](#); [Transparent \(TV show\)](#)

Further Readings

ALOK. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.alokvmenon.com>

Bobrow, E. (2016, September 13). How two producers of "Transparent" made their own trans lives more visible. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/magazine/how-two-producers-of-transparent-are-making-trans-lives-more-visible-starting-with-their-own.html>

cárdenas, m. (2020). Retrieved from <https://michacardenas.sites.ucsc.edu>

Drucker, Z. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.zackarydrucker.com>

Greenberger, A. (2019, March 26). Take me apart: Wu Tsang's art questions everything we think we know about identity. *ARTnews*. Retrieved from <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/wu-tsang-12224>

Mac, A. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.amosmac.com>

Sargent, A. (2015, March 25). Artist Juliana Huxtable's bold, defiant vision. *Vice*. Retrieved from <https://www.vice.com/en/article/exmjkp/artist-juliana-huxtables-journey-from-scene-queen-to-trans-art-star-456>

Genny Beemyn

- artists

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781544393858.n15>
10.4135/9781544393858.n15